

Department may be paying disability benefits to non-POWs

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) – Two U.S. Representatives, who are both combat veterans, sent a joint letter today to Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki asking him to investigate allegations of fraudulent Prisoner-Of-War (POW) status claims that have been reported recently in the media. The letter was sent by U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colorado), who served with the U.S. Marine Corps in the first Gulf War and recently in Iraq, and Rep. Jim Marshall (D-GA), who served in Vietnam as an Army Airborne Ranger reconnaissance platoon sergeant earning two Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart.

“As combat veterans, we recognize the unique status and needs of our former military colleagues who were imprisoned by enemy forces. They bore an extraordinary burden in defending our nation, and they deserve our support. Those who falsely claim POW status do not deserve the benefits or honors conferred upon former POWs,” Coffman and Marshall wrote in the letter.

According to a recent media report, the Department of Veterans Affairs is paying disability benefits to 286 service members claiming they were held as prisoners of war during the first Gulf War, but the Department of Defense is only aware of 21 POWs. The media reports equally disturbing figures for Vietnam POWs: there are only 662 officially recognized U.S. prisoners of war from that conflict, but 966 alleged Vietnam POWs are getting disability payments.

“I request that the Department of Veterans Affairs investigate these reports and take the appropriate action to curb any fraudulent claims of POW status,” Coffman said.

A copy of the letter is below:

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May 18, 2009

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We are writing to request the Veterans Administration investigate the situation regarding allegations of fraudulent Prisoner-Of-War (POW) status claims that have been reported recently in the media.

According to these reports, the Department of Veterans Affairs is paying disability benefits to 286 service members allegedly taken prisoner during the first Gulf War, whereas the Department of Defense only is aware of 21 actual POWs. The media reports equally disturbing figures for Vietnam POWs: there are only 662 officially recognized U.S. prisoners of war from that conflict, but 966 alleged Vietnam POWs are getting disability payments.

As combat veterans, we recognize the unique status and needs of our former military colleagues who were imprisoned by enemy forces. They bore an extraordinary burden in defending our nation, and they deserve our support. Those who falsely claim POW status do not deserve the benefits or honors conferred upon former POWs.

We would expect that your Department would be extremely interested in investigating these allegations of fraud as soon as possible. We would appreciate hearing from you with your progress in this matter.

Thank you for your service.

Sincerely,

Mike Coffman
Member of Congress

Jim Marshall
Member of Congress